

THE CONCEPT OF COMPASSION IN ISLAM

Asghar Ali Engineer

Is compassion central to Islam? Many people think jihad is more central to it than compassion. At least this is the general impression of people including of course Muslims. But this is not so. Compassion is far more central to Islam than jihad. It is certain happenings in history of Islam and also in contemporary world that this impression about jihad goes round.

In fact compassion represents the true spirit of Islam and compassion is far more vital to Islamic teachings than any thing else. In fact compassion in Islam, after the concepts of unity of God (*tawhid*) and *risalah* (messengership of Muhammad) is as central to Islam as it is to Buddhism. We will throw light on compassion in Islam in the following pages.

There are certain key words in the *Qur'an* which are greatly stressed of which four are very often repeated i.e. *rahmah*, *ihsan*, *'adl*, and *hikmah* (compassion, benevolence, justice and wisdom). *Rahmah* (compassion, mercy) and its roots abound in the *Holy Qur'an*. Among Allah's own names are *Rahman* and *Rahim* (compassionate and merciful). A Muslim begins everything by reciting *Bi Ism-i- Allah al-Rahman al-Rahim* (i.e. begin in the name of Allah Who is Compassionate and Merciful). Thus a Muslim is supposed to invoke Allah the Compassionate and Merciful at every step. He does not invoke Allah's other names (Allah has 99 names according to the Islamic belief) as he invokes Him as Merciful and Compassionate.

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The very first chapter of *the Qur'an* has the second verse as *al-Rehman al-Rahim* (The Compassionate, the Merciful). The first verse too carries the sense of compassion when it describes Allah as *Rabb al-'Alamin* (i.e. Sustainer of the whole world). The concept of sustenance of the whole world itself is based on His Mercy and Compassion for every thing He has created. In fact *rahmah* is so central to Allah's existence that it embraces all that exists in the universe (*wasi'at kulla shayin*) see verse 40:7.

In fact He sent his Messenger Muhammad also as the Mercy of the World (21:107). Thus the Prophet of Islam also represents universal mercy. As the Messenger of Allah he is representative of His Mercy and hence the Prophet himself is known as *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy of the worlds). Thus a true follower of the Prophet (PBUH) has to be merciful and compassionate to the extent humanly possible. Any one who is cruel and has no sensitivity towards sufferings of others cannot be Prophet's true follower in any sense.

This is a great pity that Muslims themselves except the sufis and their followers have forgotten the emphasis of the *Holy Qur'an* on the quality of compassion. The Sufis lay tremendous stress on compassion. Their very fundamental doctrine is what is called *sulh-i-kul* i.e. peace with all which means no violence and no aggressiveness. The majority of Muslims of course follow Sufi approach. It is only some frustrated fringe groups of Muslims who keep on talking of *jihad* and power.

It is important to note that in *Qur'an* there is no concept of war of aggression and no concept of permissiveness of violence. Even where permission of war has been given it has been given to defend and protect rights of the oppressed and exploited, and not for achieving power. There is no verse in *the Qur'an* which permits violence for conquering territory or for achieving power. In fact war has been qualified in *the Qur'an* by the words *fi' sabilillah* i.e. in the way of Allah. Thus a war can be fought, if at all necessary, not for any personal ambitions or for grabbing territory or not for personal animosity or for revenge but only in the way of Allah.

And what is the way of Allah? Allah's way is of justice, Allah's way is of protecting the rights of the poor and exploited. In fact the very first verse in *the Qur'an* permitting the use of violence reflects this very well. It says:

“And what reason you have not to fight *in the way of Allah*, and of the weak among the men and the women and the children, who say: Our Lord, take us out of this town, whose people are oppressors, and grant us from Thee a friend, and grant us from Thee a helper.” (4:75) (emphasis added).

Thus explaining the import of this verse, a noted commentator Maulana Muhammad Ali says in his *The Holy Qur'an* (Lahore, 1973, pp. 211)

“This verse explains what is meant by fighting in the way of Allah. While most of the believers who had the means had escaped from Makkah, which is here spoken of as the city whose people are oppressors, there remained those who were weak and unable to undertake a journey. These were still persecuted and oppressed by the Makkans, as is clearly shown by the words of the verse, and not only men, but even women and young children, were persecuted. Fighting to deliver them from the persecution of the oppressors was really fighting in the way of Allah. ...”

Since any fighting has been permitted only in the way of Allah it cannot be a war of aggression in any case. It has to be only on compassionate grounds, not on any other ground and hence the doctrine of compassion remains central. If there is no other way to liberate the oppressed except through use of force only then use of force will be justified otherwise not.

The Qur'an again and again shows its sympathy for the weaker sections of the society in which it includes, among others, the orphans, the widows, the poor and the exploited, the slaves and other politically or socially and economically oppressed people. It emphasises different ways of helping them. This is all on the grounds of compassion. Compassion really means sensitivity to others suffering. A person cannot be compassionate unless he/she is sensitive to others suffering. And this suffering

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includes, as we will show, not only human beings but also animals and plants.

First, let us take suffering of human beings. *The Qur'an* shows great compassion to orphans, the widows, the poor and the slaves. It wants to liberate these poorer and oppressed sections from their situation. Zakah, a toll tax, has been made obligatory on all believing Muslims, men or women to help these sections. Thus *the Qur'an* says,

“(Zakat) charity is only for the poor and the needy and those employed to administer it, and those whose hearts are made to incline, and (to free) the captives, and those in debt, and in the way of Allah and for the wayfarer—an ordinance from Allah. And Allah is Knowing, Wise.” (9:60)

Thus all the categories indicated in the above verse except two i.e. those who administer it (i.e. collect the zakah on behalf of the Islamic state or *bayt al-mal* (state treasury) and ‘those whose hearts are to be inclined or won over’ (by Muslims for their help) all other categories are of weaker sections of society—those who suffer i.e. the poor, the needy, the captives (in war), those indebted (who but the poor are indebted), the slaves and the wayfarers. They all stand in need of help. A believer who is well off must be sensitive to the needs of these categories and must help them financially to remove their sufferings on the compassionate grounds. Thus even for the payment of zakat compassion remains central.

Not only that *the Qur'an* wants to remove those who are arrogant because of their wealth and power and empower the weak so that there is no suffering in the world. It says clearly and unambiguously:

“And We desired to bestow a favour upon those who were deemed weak in the land, and to make them the leaders, and to make them the inheritors.” (28:5)

Thus *the Qur'an* favours the *mustad'ifin* (the weaker sections) to the *mustakbirin* (those powerful and arrogant).

The powerful and the arrogant people are insensitive to others suffering and want to grab as much as they can—be it wealth, be it territory or be it symbols of power. In the Qur’anic approach the powerful are most insensitive and hence most uncompassionate. They are overpowered by the greed and hence can never understand others needs. Therefore, *the Qur’an* says that

“And those who hoard up gold and silver and spend it not in Allah’s way—announce to them a painful chastisement.” (9:34)

In several verses of *the Qur’an* one finds strong denunciation of the accumulation of wealth. The chapters 104 and 107 are devoted to denunciation of accumulation of wealth and not helping the poor and sufferers. Thus compassion becomes quite an important concept in all these verses. It is important to note that suffering could be both spiritual and material. Spiritual suffering certainly follows material suffering. It is also reflected in the Holy Prophet’s famous saying *al-kalam ba’d al-ta’am* (i.e. first eating and then prayers. If one is starving one cannot pray with complete absorption.

Even fasting during the month of Ramadan can be interpreted both spiritually and materially. Fasting in spiritual sense is a form of *‘ibadah* i.e. a form of prayer and an attempt to shun consumerism for cultivating one’s spiritual potentialities. But it also helps make one sensitive to others pangs of hunger and develop sensitivity to others suffering and this develop compassion towards the poor.

Compassion towards the poor is so important that the Prophet used to say that even if one person remains hungry in a locality no angel will descend in that locality until that hungry person is fed. Also the Prophet is reported to have said that it is more meritorious to feed an hungry widow than to pray whole night. Thus one can see the intensity of the Prophet’s compassion towards others suffering, particularly those of the weaker sections of society. It was for this reason that even for expiation of one’s sins *the Qur’an* as well as the Holy Prophet requires to feed the hungry or to liberate the slaves.

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The Prophet not only asked people to treat their slaves in a humane way and give them to eat what they eat and give them to wear what they themselves wear but also encouraged them to liberate them and set example by liberating his own slave Zaid and adopted him as his son and treated him most affectionately. Zaid became so attached to him that when his father came to take him away after the Prophet liberated him he refused to go with him and chose, instead, to stay with the Prophet. Not only this, the Holy Prophet married him to his close relative Zainab. But unfortunately it did not prove to be a successful marriage. But that is not our concern here.

It was His compassion for the weaker sections of society that he not only got Bilal Habashi manumitted but gave him the highest honour of giving *azan* i.e. calling the faithfuls to prayer five times. This honour was denied even to his closest colleagues who intensely desired it. If it was not compassion for the weaker section what was it? It is this compassion which is most desirable aspect of Islamic teachings.

Prophet was equally kind to animals. When a woman of disrepute came to him and said that she saved a thirsty cat from dying by fetching water from a pit with the help of her socks, the Prophet said Allah will pardon all your sins and you will go to paradise. The Prophet, according to one hadith described entire creation (including humans, animals and trees and plants) as family of Allah (*'ayal Allah*) and all should be treated with compassion and sensitivity.

We find a hadith in *Bukhari* and also in *Sahih Muslim* that the Prophet (PBUH) told his companions that one previous Prophet burnt an anthill because an ant bit him. Allah reprimanded the Prophet for destroying the anthill as these ants also sang His praises. We are also reminded here of the story of a Sufi saint (Zubayr) who became restless when he saw an ant crawling in his room. He feared that someone will tread on it and kill. He then gently picked up the ant and put it in a box containing wheat floor as he thought it would be safe there.

We find in Imam Malik's *Al-Muwatta* that the Prophet once was seen gently wiping the face and mane of his horse with his gown. On being asked by his companions he explained that he was admonished by Allah for neglecting his horse. Hazrat 'Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law, used to admonish the Muslims not to eat too much meat and make their stomachs graveyards for animals. Prof. Iqbal Ansari, in his paper "Religion and Animal Welfare —The Islamic View" says,

"A large number of Prophet's traditions dealing with kindness and compassion to animals are included in the authentic hadith literature. Cruelty to and torturing of animals. Even the obnoxious ones in any form is forbidden. This criterion is so absolute that even when for valid reasons man is permitted to kill any animal for food or to save himself from its venom or other harm, he is enjoined to do so without causing avoidable pain or torture."

The Qur'an itself, as pointed out earlier, uses the word *rahm* (mercy, compassion) repeatedly. This word and its various derivatives has been used more than 326 times. According to *Mufradat al-Qur'an* by Imam Raghīb, an authentic dictionary of the Qur'anic terms *rahmah* means softening of heart towards one who deserves our mercy and induces us to do good to him/her. It is interesting to note that the womb of mother is also called *rahm*. Mother is always very soft towards her children (*raqiq*) and showers love and affection on them. Thus anyone who does to others qualifies for *rahm*. Thus to cultivate *rahm* is to be faithful to ones mother.

The Qur'an also says that the believers (*mu'minin*) are merciful to each other. Allah is named by *the Qur'an* as *Rahim* and *Rahman*. And according to *Mufradat* of Imam Raghīb *Rahman* is one whose mercy encompasses all, not all human beings but also entire creation. Thus only Allah can be *Rahman*, no one else. We human beings have our own limitations. We love our fellow religionists more than those belonging to other religious groups; we love those speaking our own tongue more than those speaking other tongues and we love human beings more than the animals.

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But it is not so with Allah. Allah loves and showers His Mercy equally on all. And if we are really worshippers of Allah we too should not make such distinctions. We should love all human beings equally whether they belong to our religion or not, whether they speak our tongue or not and whether they have same colour of skin as we have or not. If Allah is *Rahman* (compassionate) to all we, His servants, too should try to imitate Him as much as we can. True *'ibadah* (worshipping) can be claimed only when we try to imbibe elements of His attributes.

Thus a real Muslim is one who despite being firm in his/her faith tradition shows equal love and compassion for all human beings whether they belong to his faith tradition or not. Every faith tradition is unique and should be recognised as such but it should not become a tool of discrimination. *The Qur'an* itself declares that all human beings, all children of Adam have been honoured equally (17:70). Thus there is no justification in showing any discrimination on the basis of faith as far as *the Qur'an* is concerned.

Many prominent 'Ulama have argued that Allah is *Rahman* (compassionate) in the sense that he provides for even *kafirs*. There is an important Sufi lore which is pointer to this compassion of Allah. It is said that the Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) would not eat unless there was some guest on his table. Once it so happened that there did not come any guest and Prophet Abraham was hungry.

Abraham then went out in search of a guest and he found one very old man in the nearby forest. He invited the old man to dine with him and the man agreed and started out with Abraham. On the way Abraham asked him about his religion and he said I am an atheist. Prophet Abraham was angry and cancelled his invitation. When he did so he heard a voice from above: O Abraham We tolerated him (the old man) for seventy years despite his disbelief and you could not tolerate him for seven minutes. Abraham repented and took the old man home for dining.

The lesson is clear what to believe and who is right and who is wrong should be left to Allah rather than our weak

judgment. Our judgment is often influenced by several factors including our ego, our interests, our beliefs, colour of our skin and our ethnicity. Allah alone can judge most impartially. Thus our respect for others and our compassion should not be meant for limited number of groups. It should be as wide in sweep as possible.

When *the Qur'an* refers to weaker sections (*musta'ifun*) it does not qualify it with Muslim. It uses *mustad'ifun* as inclusive of all human beings. And all of them are equally entitled to our compassion and Allah's mercy, no less, no more. *The Qur'an* nowhere uses words like Muslim orphans, Muslim widows or Muslim slaves. It uses these words in general without any qualification whatsoever. Similarly *the Qur'an* does not use any qualification for the powerful and arrogant *mustakbirun*. They can belong to any religion, race or ethnicity. Arrogance is condemnable found anywhere.

The Qur'an's attitude is so compassionate towards all human beings that even in the matter of *wasiyyah* (i.e. making a will) it advises that if apart from your relatives, some one needy is present at that time, make some provision for them also. Also, *the Qur'an* uses the word *sadaqah* for charity which is derived from the root *sidq* which means truthfulness. Real charity (*sadaqah*) is one which is done with sincerity and truthfulness. Anything which is given to show off, or not with sincere and compassionate intention, will not qualify as *sadaqah*.

Only that feeling qualifies for compassion, which moves our heart for suffering of others and that motivates us to help others. Thus the use of the word *sadaqah* for charity is very significant. It is the condition of a human person, rather than his/her religion that should move us to help. Compassion is the best quality one can have towards other creatures, particularly towards other human beings and animals. It is suffering which is most fundamental not one's religion, language or race. A Qur'anic verse which describes some of the qualities of a good believer says,

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“Those who spend in ease as well as in adversity and those who restrain (their) anger and pardon men. And Allah loves doers of good (to others).” (3:133).

Thus it will be seen that those who control their anger and pardon others and do good to others are those whom Allah loves. And these qualities are very much the basis of compassion. Anger and violence are always denounced by Allah. They are just opposite of compassion. One of Allah’s name is Ghafur i.e. one who pardons, one who is not revengeful. A compassionate person can never be revengeful.

Thus one can conclude from closer study of *Qur’an* and hadith that compassion is the best human quality and no one deserves to be human unless he is compassionate. Thus it is quite central to the teachings of Islam.